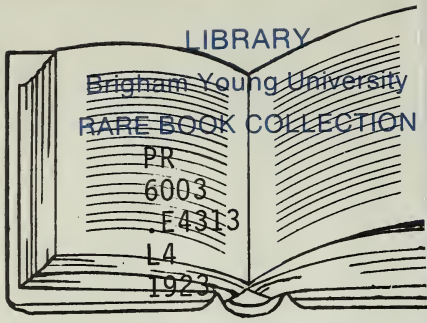


The Legend of  
Monte della Sibilla



OR  
Le Paradis de la  
Reine Sibille

Clive Bell



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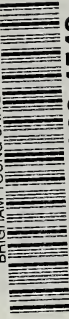
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THE  
LEGEND OF MONTE  
DELLA SIBILLA  
OR LE PARADIS DE LA REINE SIBILLE

CLIVE BELL

PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY  
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*TO POLLY FLINDERS*

THE LEGEND OF MONTE DELLA SIBILLA  
OR  
“LE PARADIS DE LA REINE SIBILLE”



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If you will stop and take a drink  
Where I did, late one afternoon  
In April, you may see turn pink  
A patch of snow, which very soon  
Yellows to green: it seems quite near;  
But is, in fact, up Norcia way  
Or further: the effect's more queer  
Than beautiful: and should you say  
To the *padrone*, Gian Mannino,  
"What peak is that which looks so odd?"  
He'll answer, "Monte Sibillino—  
But they've bunged up the hole, thank God."

Herr Hans Van Branbourg, 1310  
 To 1352 or so,—  
 (A period, it seems, when men  
 Not unlike us were apt to go  
 Five hundred miles to get a thrill  
 They might have had for sitting still),—  
 Branbourg, I say, having done the lakes  
 And all the sights of La Toscana,  
 (A jaunt which now a fortnight takes,  
 Less then, because one skipped Verona,  
 “The Tomb” not having found its owner\*),  
 Came southward by the Vâl Chiana;  
 Heard of the Sybil, wouldn’t wait,—no,  
 Not a moment, at Spoleto,  
 But set off promptly for the cave.  
 The natives told him he was brave,—  
 Thinking him mad. Had not a monk,  
 Il don Antonio Fumato,  
 There lost his wits, and, in a funk,  
 Five bold young bucks from near Fossato,  
 Who made the same attempt before,  
 At what they heard and what they saw,  
 (Or was that later?) quaked like jelly,  
 Shaming the sires of Gabrielle?

\* In my opinion it is time  
 To legalise the cockney rhyme.



They had seen things to make saints curse,—  
 A gate that kept on clipping, clipping,  
 (Much like a storm-door only worse,)  
 And bound to give you such a nipping  
 As nips the persons, now and then,  
 Of thoughtless, shunting, railway-men.  
 They had felt strange and ghastly winds,  
 They had heard strange and sudden noises,  
 And what in Italy one finds  
 More rarely, gentle, whispering voices :  
 'Twas woman's doing—never doubt it—  
 A female influence ruled the air ;  
 And what the coarser said about it  
 Was, that although when you got there  
 The place might seem an honest hovel,  
 Inside, they guessed, you'd find a brothel.

Indeed it was a dangerous place.  
 But Germans are a stubborn race,  
 Not to say obstinate, to boot  
 Are fond of ladies : Herr Van Bran  
 Swore that if anyone could do't  
 He, Hans Van Branbourg, was the man ;  
 Pushed on to Norcia, then climbed higher,  
 And with him went a single squire,  
 Called Pons—they say an Englishman,  
 I hope he was, because I can  
 (As you I think will soon agree )  
 Pronounce him brave as brave can be,

Yet sensible as Sancho Panza,  
Wherewith I neatly close the stanza.

The knight pushed on, the squire behind,  
They cared not tuppence for the wind,  
Nor for the strange and sudden noises,  
Nor the discreetly whispering voices,  
Nor all those signs which long ago  
Did duty for a "*numero*".

They passed the gates of bronze. They came  
To gates of crystal. Here they tapped.  
A lady-porter asked their name:  
Whereat the leader boldly rapped  
Out that which you've already heard, viz :-  
"Herr Hans Van Branbourg, at your service."  
The doors flew wide, and to their eyes  
Revealed the Sibyl's paradise.

What saw they? Antoine de la Sale,  
Who wrote *Les quinze joies* and all  
*Les cent nouvelles nouvelles* as well,  
What I could not invent can tell;  
Seeing he came in 1420  
To hold an inquest on the spot,  
And information got in plenty,—  
Indeed he clambered to the grot,  
But only peeped inside the cavern—  
Later, however, at the tavern  
He learnt the truth of what befell  
Van Branbourg in the Sybil's hell.

They saw a crowd of pretty girls—  
 These were the Sybil's seneschals—  
 Who bade them change their dirty linen  
 And rigged them out "from the beginning"  
 (The text has *ab initio*);  
 Up strike the fiddles; off they go  
 Through pretty rooms and splendid halls  
 And gardens framed in sheltering walls,  
 The which were gay with flowers as well  
 As comely "*dames et demoiselles*",  
 Accompanied by knights and squires  
 In divers fashionable attires,  
 Much as our Longchamps beauties go  
 Surrounded by their *gigolos*.

Gaping they go ; until they see  
 'La reine Sibylle', who from her throne  
 Welcomed the strangers graciously,  
 Observing she'd already known  
 Men of their race, which (*vide Tacite*)  
 Was honest, brave, but inficite,\*  
 And only that for want of practice  
 In social arts and crafts. The fact is  
 She much admired the Teuton physique,  
 (I know some ladies can't abide it),  
 So murmured, "You're my guests for this week :

\* Not 'facete' ? No, because in modern times  
 We're prouder of our Latin than our rhymes.



Later you'll tell me, when you've tried it,  
 If you'll become my *pensionnaires*.  
 I'll only add that we are here  
 Until the crack of doom." "And then?"  
 Queried our cautious gentlemen.

"Then we shall see what we shall see,"  
 Answered the lady airily,  
 Fobbing them off with such old saws  
 As rarely fail to elicit roars  
 Of laughter from the House and Bar,  
 —As "Wait and see" and "Chi lo sa";  
 Then, sweetly added, "If you please,  
 Hear our conditions, which are these.

Who stays  
 Eight days  
 May go away the next.  
 On no pretext  
 Who stays more  
 May or durst  
 Go before  
 The thirty-first.  
 Who yet stays more  
 Must outstay  
 By one day  
 His fifteenth score.  
 Then or never :  
 For who stays

Further days  
Stays for ever,"\*

"Further," said she, "if you will be  
My guests, this Paradise of mine  
Is at your service; what you see  
Of fun and beauty, flowers and wine,  
Is for your pleasure: also choose  
Amongst my ladies who are free  
(There're always plenty on the loose)  
Her who most charms you. Certainly  
You'll find them charming, trained to please,  
To move with grace, converse with ease,  
Well bred, well dressed, well read, well meant,  
In all ways sweetly competent:"  
Whereat squire Pons was "moult" content,  
And, plucking at his master's jacket,  
Said "Sir, let's stay and stand the racket."

They said they'd stay a week; but when  
The week was up they stayed again;  
Indeed "*les plaisirs étaient tels*"  
Days seemed like hours in that hell:  
So says La Sale, who ought to know

\* Perhaps I ought to add a line  
To say the verse is Sybilline;  
It is portentously ill writ;  
Scholars must make the best of it.

What pleasures seemed like years ago,  
 Seeing he wrote "*Les quinze joies  
 De Mariage*", but then, *ma foi*,  
 They took their pleasures\* otherwise  
 Than husbands in that Paradise.

It was an abbey of Thelème,  
 Compounded with Arabian nights;  
 Where every sort of pretty game  
 And wit and wine and all delights  
 Were shared with pretty, clever girls,  
 Who never dreamed of being pals;  
 But were what girls should always be,  
 In manner prim, in fancy free.  
 Thus was there hope for everyone,  
 All were fastidious, none was prude,  
 Which means flirtation's ticklish fun  
 Supplanted dreary certitude.  
 There was the best of everything,  
 Of wine, of song, and all the rest,  
 The best to drink, to kiss, to sing,  
 And taste to know what is the best.  
 A match for every mood: to please  
 The thoughtful, cloisters; polished halls  
 For dancers; vines and olive trees  
 And rivers under ancient walls

\* Both Sale and Andrea Baberino say  
 "*Le coeur ne saurait les imaginer*".



Flowing, for every heart's delight,—  
 Were there : and there was rest by day and mirth by  
 night.

Music there was in every part ;  
 And almost always you could hear  
 A song or septet by Mozart,  
 And not a note of Meyerbeer.  
 Their story-tellers had a way  
 Of being neither dull nor long  
 But, like Voltaire or Mérimée,  
 Were rarely sweet and never strong.  
 Perrons, parterres and green pelouses  
 Abounded; walks of turf and sand;  
 And restaurants like La Pérouse;  
 Fiddles and horns, and no Jazz Band.  
 There were no bounders and no bores,  
 No reach-me-downs, no general stores,  
 No clubs, no colonels, not a hearty  
 Good fellow there to spoil a party,  
 No district-visitor or pastor,  
 And not a sign of Lady Astor.  
 There were no 'cinemas', no groups  
 Of shop boys, no colonial troops,  
 No one who hit straight from the shoulder,  
 And not a season-ticket holder;  
 There was nor creditor nor debtor,  
 There was not in that pleasant land  
 A soul who wished to make it better,

All were content to understand  
 Their happiness ; nay, what is more,  
 No lady wanted for her lover  
 That kind of smutty, solemn bore,  
 Who sick with genius, must uncover  
 For our souls' good his nasty sore:  
 Believe me there did not exist  
 A single, small coprologist.  
 So simple-minded were the ladies  
 In that old-fashioned Sibyl's Hades.

Alas ! pure joy the fates forbid.  
 Alas ! that poet's not an ass  
 Who has it that an *aliquid*  
*Amari* rises in the glass  
 Almost invariably when we  
 Suppose we've cheated destiny.

Van Branbourg, and his British pup too,  
 Observed that every Friday night,  
 No matter what they might be up to,  
 The partners of their dear delight  
 Slipped off at twelve, upon the stroke,  
 And left them puzzling out the joke,  
 As best they might, till Monday morning ;  
 When back their ladies came more kind,  
 More sweet, than ever. But this warning  
 Served to unsettle Branbourg's mind.

He had a Lutheran soul. What malice,  
 What mischief might they be about?  
 He tracked them to the Sybil's palace,  
 And there it was he found them out.  
 From Friday night to Monday morning,  
 He found these artless, frolick gadders,  
 Who left their lovers without warning,  
 Lay with their queen, asleep like adders ;  
 Not in a peaceful girlish doze,  
 But serpentlike and comatose.\*  
 "Pish," said the squire, "here are no evils."  
 The German said, "These girls are devils."

His northern soul was deeply stirred,  
 He said—"My man, it's time we went,"  
 Which good squire Pons thought quite absurd,  
 And said so. "Pons, d'you know we've spent  
 Here," groaned his chief, "three hundred days,  
 Abounding in lascivious ways.  
 Pack up, and say 'good-bye' my man."  
 Thus spake the Prussian Knight, Van Bran.

The ladies, as you may suppose,  
 Were *nâvrées, marries*, quite upset.  
 They had to let them go because  
 Such was the formal bargain. Yet

\* Sale says they "*a la manière  
 De couleuvres et de serpents*" were.

They used all arts against all rules,  
 As Dido did. The gentlemen,  
 Much like Aenæas, looked like fools,  
 And acting now as he did then,  
 First sighed, then blustered, lastly went :  
 Such is the heroic temperament.

They went to see the Pope at Rome,  
 To beg his Holiness's pardon :  
 And though the Suisse said "Not at home",  
 They caught him reading in the garden :  
 Down furiously the book he slammed,  
 And bellowed "You may both be damned."

In this some hold the Pope was wrong,  
 And went by much beyond his brief :  
 But that's no matter to my song,  
 Nor can it give us great relief  
 That Lettenhove speaks of a stick  
 Which played the old Tannhäuser trick,  
 Bourgeoning into buds of pity,  
 After our friends had left the city.  
 The Pope, he adds, was quite upset,  
 And owned he'd spoken out of pet,  
 Was strangely troubled for their fate,  
 Sent absolution—all too late :  
 For which, he thinks, the Pope must go  
 To join his victims down below.



You may conceive the lamentation  
 Of our poor knight on this occasion.  
 He was, like others of his nation,  
 A damned good fellow—only flabby—  
 Who, on the slightest provocation,  
 Would fight or weep. A speech so shabby  
 As this, he took to heart, because  
 His sense of sin increased his fears ;  
 So, on the Milvian Bridge it was  
 His squire found him, bathed in tears,  
 And gathered it was his intent  
 To jump from off that monument.

And here our Pons was at his best ;  
 He turned the scene from tears to laughter,  
 Said "Cheer-i-o" and all the rest  
 The case demanded : "Since hereafter  
 Our lot is bound to be unpleasant,"  
 Said he "let's think about the present ;  
 And, since the Pope declares us sinful,  
 By God, old bean, let's have a skinfull.  
 Seeing Old Nick is whom we're meant for  
 We'll wait at least until we're sent for ;  
 I see no sort of use in hurry  
 Or going half-way to meet worry.  
 Since when we're dead we'll roast for lust  
 Let's put off dying till we must ;  
 And since to roast foredoomed I am,  
 Why liefer for a sheep than lamb ;

Before we reach the Christian hell,  
 There is another—you know well.”  
 The knight deplored this shallow mood,  
 But let Pons lead him where he would.

“And they are gone : aye, ages long ago,”  
 (That is from Keats),—gone without absolution,  
 Or penitence ; nor have we means to know  
 If they regret their hasty resolution.  
 Only La Sale, the encomiast of marriage,  
 (And author of a book still more surprising\*)  
 In 1420 coming in his carriage,  
 Or on his mule, here archaeologizing  
 In Umbria, heard this curious story :  
 And thinking that there might be more he,  
 As I have said, stopped at the tavern,  
 And even climbed up to the cavern,  
 Whereon, confirming what he'd heard,  
 He puzzled out this awful word—  
 I give it as the author gave it—  
 “Her Hans Wanbranbourg (*sic*) *intravit*” :

I give it just as it was writ  
 HER HANS WANBRANBOURG  
 INTRAVIT.

Years later, Monsieur Gaston Paris,  
 That learned Frenchman, came this way.

\* From this strange book well named ‘*La Salade*’  
 I draw the matter of my ballad.

It poured with rain. He could not tarry.  
 He gave the cave a single day.  
 He noticed that the mouth was blocked  
 And asked the peasants 'why', who, shocked,  
 Informed him how on summer nights  
 The Sybil and her horrid sprites  
 Came out and danced their hellish jigs,  
 And crushed the corn and scared the pigs.  
 On which unamiable narration  
 The *savant* made this observation—  
 That they were very simple fools  
 To put their trust in masons' tools,  
 Seeing that fiends, our souls' ill-wishers,  
 Slip slyly through the smallest fissures.  
 And, in effect, for all their skill,  
 The peasants owned, *they dance there still.*

O Hans Van Branbourg, I applaud  
 You first, remembering you're a lord;  
 And next the not-to-be-forgot,  
 Your squire and my compatriot,  
 Him, Pons. For since we're far from sure  
 If Heaven will prove a sinecure,  
 And seeing that it's quite uncertain  
 What fate awaits beyond the curtain;  
 Seeing you wanton down the years,  
 While we are in the vale of tears,  
 And even thus the odds are even  
 On waking up in Hell or Heaven,

While many hold the odds not small  
 Against our waking up at all ;  
 I can't but think that you were wise  
 To choose the Sibyl's paradise :  
 I say it with a heavy heart,  
 I think you chose the better part.

For in man's dire perplexity,  
 The old and best philosophy  
 Holds that a woodcock in the shop is  
 Well worth a couple in the coppice,  
 And tons of may-be bliss don't measure  
 One ounce of certain, solid pleasure.  
 Whence, once in Anchiale's city  
 Aristobulus found this witty  
 Inscription cut with wise intent,  
 Upon an ancient monument,  
**ΕΣΘΙΕ ΠΙΝΕ ΠΑΙΖΕ**, thus,  
 By good king Sardanapalus,  
 "Eat, drink, and—well, the rest's not worth a cuss."

And so, my friends, though your adventure  
 May get from others only censure,  
 Though curates and idealists  
 May call you 'rank materialists',  
 And pompous atheistic prigs,  
 'Blind-worms' and 'Hedonistic pigs';  
 Though other men, and wise ones too,

May hold that there is more to do  
Than laugh and let the world go by  
Saying "To-morrow we shall die";  
Yet in a matter so obscure  
Wise men may differ to be sure.  
Myself, I never thought it clever  
To fuss about the "grand forever",  
And cultivate a soul with care for  
That vast but vague hereafter ; wherefore  
In my opinion, you did well  
To live for love, though love is hell.

















